NECESSARY LOSSES: A SERMON FOR ALL SAINTS' DAY

October 29, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Hebrews 11, selected, 12:1-2

"...we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses..."
-Hebrews 12:1 (RSV)

In the old Communion Liturgy there occurs this peculiar phrase:

"It is very meet, right, and our bounden duty that we should at all times and at all places give thanks unto Thee, O Holy Lord... Therefore, with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we worship and adore Thy glorious name."

We've eliminated that language in our rewritten liturgies. It's archaic; it reflects a medieval cosmology centuries out of date; it's grossly hierarchical; it's theologically imperial; and it sounds funny. Maybe not so much here, with a high and mysterious Gothic roof, sheltering a company of celestial musicians... but "angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven," in a clapboard prairie church with an out-of-tune upright piano and flies buzzing in the still hot July air; or a cement block storefront where steel workers and janitors and bus drivers bring African-American and Polish and Croation accents and dialects, not Thomas Crammer's glorious English, to the act of corporate worship.

I recall it well. The first time I laid eyes on the phrase was the night before I presided at my first communion as an ordained pastor. Never having been introduced to the fine points of Presbyterial liturgy, ignorant of the fact that there was such a thing, I had ordered a copy of the Book of Common Worship, was looking over the order for the celebration of the Sacrament and I came to that phrase and concluded that I couldn't say that... that my modest little flock in northern Indiana joined in praise and adoration by angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven was more, frankly, than I was ready to affirm or say out loud. So I dropped it.

Now a funny thing has happened. The sentence doesn't sound so odd anymore. The more people I have known and loved who have died, the more that peculiar old phrase makes a peculiar kind of sense to me. The simple

fact is that at twenty-five you don't know many of the "company of heaven" except by reputation. Several decades later you know a lot of them: many of them. The same thing happens with the hymn: "For all the Saints Who from their Labors Rest." You sing it mostly unconsciously for twenty or thirty years, enjoying Ralph Vough Williams' robust tune - and either cringing at the images or else not thinking about them... "And when the fight is fierce, the warfare long, steals on the ear the distant triumph song, And hearts are brave again, and arms are strong, Alleluia! Alleluia!" And then someone you love dies - and the hymn becomes a very personal and powerful affirmation of something your intellect, your reason, cannot express or quite comprehend. I still think archangels sound like something the Episcopalians thought up, but the "whole company of heaven" is an idea I find I like more and more.

There is no more important life task than coming to terms with loss - finding some means to cope with the fact of loss and diminishment. Annie Dillard calls it "the extraordinary rent you have to pay as long as you stay." Author and columnist Judith Viorst has written a fine best seller, Necessary Losses, the title of which I have shamelessly appropriated. Her thesis is that we not only have to endure an uninterrupted sequence of losses as long as we live, we grow as human beings into our fullness only to the degree that we cope with those losses: loss of loved ones, but also loss of "romantic dreams, impossible expectations, illusions of power, and the loss of our own younger self." [p. 2]

We grow by letting go, she says and her illustrations are both funny and also very poignant.

"What am I doing with a mid-life crisis?" she asks.

"This morning I was seventeen.
I have barely begun the beguine and its
good-night ladies already.

While I've been wondering who to be
when I grow up someday,
my acne has vanished away and it's
sagging kneecaps already." [p. 298]

Viorst writes from a feminine perspective but most men, I believe, can make a gender translation when she describes "letting go of one thing after another: our waistlines, our vigor, our sense of adventure, our 20/20 vision, our trust in justice, our earnestness, our playfulness, our dream of being a tennis star, or a TV star, or a senator, or the woman for whom Paul Newman finally leaves JoAnne. We give up hoping to read all the books we once were bound to read, and to go to all the places we'd once vowed to visit. We give up hoping we'll save the world from cancer or from war. We even give up hoping that we'll succeed in becoming underweight." [p. 301]

The loss of a family member produces the highest stress and the most pain, but there are many losses along the way: the loss of children as they grow and move away; the loss of job by retirement or by being laid off; the loss of home and friends when we move to a new city; the loss of

marriage through divorce; the loss of possessions by fire or earthquake; and all the physical losses which accompany aging.

For instance, our culture, observes Judith Viorst, requires abandonment of sexuality: far too soon, with its consequent loss of physical intimacy, sensual pleasure and heightened self-worth. "We are neutered," she says "by the silent message that the fires of passion should either burn out in old age or be screened." [p. 323]

To that point I read a poignant short story, The Last Hour, about an elderly woman watching her belongings being sold at a lawn sale prior to her admission to a retirement home. She couldn't stand to look at the bed. "The hand-carved walnut bed she and Will had slept in in their entire married life, dismantled, leaned against the white clapboard wall of the porch.

"In the home, she couldn't use the bed - it was too big. 'We only use single beds here, Mrs. Randall.'

"It was an affront. Didn't she know how well you slept if you could feel the one you loved beside you?" [Martha Whitmon Hickman, Weavings, May/June, 1989, p. 15-20]

One of the helpful things to learn along the way is that loss results in grief - all the losses in life, not just the death of loved ones. Dr. Granger Westberg, who taught at the University of Chicago Divinity School and Medical School and the University of Illinois Medical School, and is a Lutheran pastor, was a pioneer in helping us understand the importance of "grief work." Grief, Westberg taught us, is what happens when we lose anything important. We can express grief in healthy ways or unhealthy ways, but grief happens either way.

In his little classic volume, Good Grief, Westberg outlined the ten stages of grief through which we all must go. At the time of loss, say the death of someone very close, we enter a kind of psychic shock, often times experienced as emotional numbness. The second stage is the emotional release. Then comes loneliness. Physical symptoms come next: insomnia, headaches, stomach problems. The next stage is guilt: "If only I had called the doctor myself; or, if only I had been kinder." Guilt is followed by anger, Westberg taught: anger at the doctors who delivered too little too late, nurses who were rude, hospital clerks, the pastor who didn't call enough... anger, often unexpressed at the deceased and finally at God.

Then slowly, after resistance, a returning to hope and a reaffirmation of reality.

It is helpful to know about the grief process as we encounter life's necessary losses. But behind it all is the fact of our own mortality.

In an essay on Aging and Letting Go, Joseph Sittler, not long before his own death, wrote: "We must stop this conspiracy of silence about death, and talk openly about it. One can go to church a whole life time and never hear a sermon on death.

Sittler is careful to define what he means and does not mean by pointing out that there is "not a single clear and concrete word in the Bible about life after death"... but there is this: "whether we live or die, we are the Lord's." Period! "That word," said Sittler, in his eighties, "is immensely satisfying to old people... they weep and they are consoled because they know they are not alone." And then the great theologian pointed to this peculiar doctrine: We are thinking about "All the Company of Heaven - the Communion of Saints." "This is the human condition: this is the company toward membership in which we are all moving." [Gravity & Grace, p. 124-126]

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight... and run with perseverance the race that is set before us" is the way the New Testament puts it. That wonderful image comes at the end of a roll call of heroes out of the past:

Abel	Abraham	Jacob
Enoch	Sara	Moses
Noah	Isaac	Rahab

On and on it goes... a wonderful list of characters, not all saintly by any means, if by saintly we mean moral virtuosity. Rahab, for instance, was a prostitute. What those people have in common was that they trusted God, had faith, lived, someone said, as if they really believed God's promises, which is my favorite definition of faith - "living as if God's promises are true." The list, that cloud of witnesses, was assembled and sent to first century Christians who had no idea whether or not they would survive the certain onsluaght of persecution, or whether or not they would have the courage not to buckle under it. "You are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses"... "a cheering section" as you run that race.

Protestants don't talk much about saints. I looked in one of the classic texts based on the articles of the Creed and discovered the typical Protestant methodology for dealing with Communion of Saints which is to ignore it. "I believe in the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins." The text didn't even give it a paragraph, implied that communion of saints is a synonym for church and hurried on as if in fear that Protestant readers might be lured back to Rome if we thought about saints.

What happened? As usual we have to consult history. Next Wednesday, November 1, is All Saints' Day. It has been All Saints' Day since the Middle Ages. It was an occasion for remembering the saints, saying masses for the saints, celebrating the faith and their memory. Like everything else in the Middle Ages, however, this basically good idea got mixed up with a little superstition. The eve of All Saints' Day was known as All Hallows Eve: and the superstition was that on All Hallows Eve the spirits, or ghosts or the dead, emerged from their graves and roamed around "going bump in the dark." In order to ward off unwelcome ghosts or spirits it was the custom to carve a fierce face in a hollowed out gourd, and insert a candle.

All Hallows Eve became Halloween. Brother Martin Luther chose the day of All Hallows to nail his 95 Theses on the church door in Wittenberg, and among his most vigorous protestations were a few over the abuse of the whole system of saints and the veneration of saints' relics and the paying for a share of the saints' left-over merit which an individual with enough money could accumulate like an eternal I.R.A.... The bottom line is that Protestants abolished the very mention of saints, the more Protestant they became.

We made our point, and in making it we lost something important. An anthropologist observes: "We arise from the purging of old rituals simpler and poorer." [Mary Douglas, Natural Symbols in Literary Guide to the Bible, p. 516, Hebrews.]

We lost a sense of community and continuity. We gave ourselves a radical individualism which has found expression in the political structures and theologies of the West. We spawned a sense that the faith began in our generation, and that history is, as the American industrialist put it, "Bunk." The poets and artists who know us best say that we made ourselves lonely when we rejected the notion of community or communion of saints.

The early Christians needed to know that they were part of something that began before they arrived on the scene and would continue after them and in that they were not unique. We all need to know it.

Sometimes it breaks through to us in spite of our theological flatness.

Have you noticed how the past lives in you: how in spite of yourself you keep sounding like your parents and have you ever pondered how that connects you with lots of people; people you never even met - grandparents and great grandparents and great, great grandparents - speaking through you.

In Russell Baker's memoir, The Good Times, he talks a lot about his mother. I used his amusing introduction - the way she always expected more of her son - and inundated him with litanies of expectation. "Someday you might make something of yourself, Russell... If there's anything I hate, it's a quitter." At the end of the book his mother has died and at her funeral Baker reflects that he had recently found himself telling his children what his mother had told him. She had embedded it in my marrow, bone and blood. There, anchored beyond reason's power to crush, it would keep me always restless.

"So it is with a family. We carry the dead generations within us and pass them on to the future aboard our children. This keeps the people of the past alive long after we have taken them to the churchyard."

"If there's one thing I can't stand, Russell, it's a quitter."

"Lord, I hear her still." [p. 344-351]

Madeline L'Engle wrote that she learned to know and understand her father far more after his death than during his life. "Here we are on the border of Christian mystery" she writes. "We are not meant to be separated as we have become from those who have gone before us and those who will come after." [Walking on Water, p. 80]

All the Company of Heaven... two metaphors help me. One, my favorite, I have spoken of before and will again. The Balcony. The late Carlile Marney - delightful Southern Baptist preacher and pastor to broken pastors, used to say that human personality is like a house: a fairly complex, elaborate structure. Some houses are fancy. Some are plain, functional. Some are ostentatious, some modest. Each has a number of rooms. Each has a formal parlor, family room, kitchen. Each has a basement where the plumbing is and where we keep the trash. Sometimes we live in our parlor; sometimes in the bedroom and sometimes we're down in the basement. Sometimes, he used to say with a twinkle in his eyes, we try to live down there all the time, as if plumbing and trash were all there is to us.

But if you come upstairs and step out on to the front lawn and look up, you'll see something else: maybe something you didn't even know was there because you've been spending too much time in the cellar; namely a gracious balcony with a fancy white wrought iron railing. On the balcony are some people. Those balcony people are the good and strong and healthy influences in your life. Your parents are probably there, grandparents, some others you know: teachers, coaches, conductors, friends, old neighbors; and there are people up there you never met but who influenced you. Your great, great grandparents are up there...

That image helps me with Communion of Saints. All the Company of Heaven. And so an appropriate way to observe All Saints' Day is to walk out into your garden, look up, see who's up there for you; name them; wave at them.

The promise is that they are there for you. The New Testament writer uses an athletic metaphor... You are running a race: Your life is like a race - a distance race I always thought and you come back into the stadium, exhausted, drained, with nothing left to give and there they are, a stadium full of people cheering, lifting you up, giving you strength and courage you didn't have a moment before... a cloud of witnesses, pulling for you as you finish the race you are called to run... your family, your heroes and heroines, all the way back into history - your saints.

The doctrine of the Communion of Saints is an effort to express what is perhaps most inexpressable about our faith: the profound mystery that we are not alone, not now and not ever: that in Jesus Christ the loneliness and isolation of human death has been broken open. Words fail, obviously. We can't get it said although we try. Those who have gone before us are with God. Their essence, their reality - did not terminate with the end of their lives. They are for us and in some way beyond understanding or knowing, they are with us.

"Maybe we should just believe it," Frederick Buechner suggests. "Angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim and all the company of heaven... it means everybody we ever loved and lost including the ones we didn't know we loved until we lost them or didn't love at all..." [Whistling in the Dark, p. 30]

And then even Buechner's words begin to bend and break under the weight, as is the case ultimately with even the most beautiful words and phrases he or I or anyone else for that matter could fashion.

So maybe we should just believe it.

"We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses... let us run with perserverance the race that is set before us."

Amen.